

“I Have a Dream” Speech by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (August 28, 1963)

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Essay by Gregory Alan Barnes (guest post)*



Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

It was late afternoon, on a warm August day, as Martin Luther King, Jr. stood before a crowd of more than 250,000 onlookers at the March on Washington to deliver his now famous “I have a Dream” speech.

Many who gathered in the crowd that day were tired from the long train and bus rides that brought them from the Deep South and places out west. Others were simply exhausted from the long list of speakers that preceded Dr. King.

Serving as the program’s anchor, it was up to Dr. King to take what could only be described as an increasingly weary crowd and replenish it with infectious energy. It was a task that Dr. King was fully prepared to handle.

His remarks began with a reference to the Emancipation Proclamation and its promise of freedom. It was an appropriate beginning considering Dr. King was standing in the shadow of the Lincoln Memorial and the march was occurring 100 years after its signing.

Reflecting on the century old decree, Dr. King expressed the general enthusiasm with which it was originally received but went on to note that “one hundred years later, the Negro is still not free” due to a societal crippling by the “manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination.”

From there, Dr. King quickly turned to a discussion of the US Constitution and Declaration of Independence. According to King, these sacred documents constituted a “promissory note” imbued with rights and privileges to which every American was to fall heir. In the case of the Negro people, however, King proclaimed that America had defaulted on this obligation, and provided a “bad check” that had come back marked “insufficient funds.”

Throughout the remainder of Dr. King's *prepared* remarks, he reiterated the importance of continuing the struggle for justice and equality on behalf of "all of God's children." He also cautioned his fellow marchers against satisfying their "thirst for freedom by drinking from the cup of bitterness and hatred"--noting that the quest for justice couldn't be built on a platform of "wrongful deeds."

Had Dr. King's speech ended there it would have been great, but an unexpected turn of events help make it exceptional.

As Dr. King was encouraging his cohorts to return to their communities to continue the fight for equality, he heard a voice from just offstage. It was his good friend, Mahalia Jackson, who shouted out: "Tell them about the dream, Martin!"

Dr. King swiftly rose to the occasion.

He provided an improvisational account of an America free of racial intolerance. A dream where racially colorblind communities could break bread together, and little children of different ages and races would be free to play with one another. For Dr. King, this vision was "deeply rooted in the American dream."

By all accounts, Dr. King's speech was considered a tremendous success. It led to his being named "Man of the Year" by "Time" magazine later that year, and the receipt of the Nobel Peace Prize the following year. The speech also played a pivotal role in the continued struggle for civil rights.

Just two months prior to the march, the United States Congress had introduced President Kennedy's civil rights legislation. At the time of its introduction, the prospects for the legislation's passage were far from certain. An ill-received speech would only further complicate matters. In particular, a lackluster performance could stall momentum; while an overly passionate performance could have inspired unwanted rioting. Dr. King was able to "thread the needle" perfectly, in a manner that convinced President Kennedy to continue to press forward with his civil rights agenda.

Few orators could have pulled off such a delicate balancing act, but relying on his educational upbringing at Morehouse College, teachings attained in seminary and experience in the pulpit, Dr. King crafted a speech that not only stirred a generation of social change agents of the '60s, it has continued to inspire future generations to come.

In 2002, the Library of Congress honored Dr. King's "I Have a Dream" speech by adding it to the National Recording Registry. A fitting tribute where the dream continues to live on.

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*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.